NAXOS
A Guided Tour of
Nationalism in the
Romantic Era
Volume 3

BRAHMS, JOHANNES (1833–1897)

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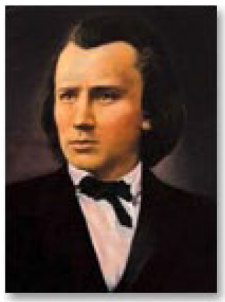
46 Variations in E flat major on a theme by Schumann, Op. 23, Variation 1



BRAHMS, JOHANNES (1833–1897)

Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double-bass player and a seamstress. His childhood was spent in relative poverty and he helped his family by playing the piano in dockside taverns. His early talent as a pianist led to talk of him as a child prodigy, and Eduard Marxsen (1806–1887) taught him the technical basis of composition. In 1851 Brahms met the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi (1828–1898), who introduced him to Hungarian dance music, which would later come to have an influence on his work. Two years later they set out on a concert tour. In Weimar they met Liszt, but Brahms failed to impress the Master. Later he was introduced to Schumann, who detected the promise of greatness in his work. After Schumann's death Brahms maintained a long friendship with his widow, the pianist and composer Clara Schumann, whose advice he always valued. Brahms eventually settled in Vienna, where to some he seemed the awaited successor to Beethoven. His blend of Classical form with a Romantic harmonic idiom made him the champion of those opposed to the musical innovations of Wagner and Liszt. He died in Vienna on 3 April 1897.

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC (Tracks 1-7)
Brahms wrote four symphonies, massive in structure, and all the result of long periods of work and revision. The two early serenades have their own particular charm, while the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*—in fact the *St Anthony Chorale*, used by that composer—enjoy enormous popularity, as they illustrate a form of which Brahms had complete mastery. A pair of overtures—the *Academic Festival Overture* and the *Tragic Overture*—and arrangements of his *Hungarian Dances* completes the body of orchestral music without a solo instrument.

CONCERTOS (Tracks 8-11)
Brahms's concertos consist of two magnificent and demanding piano concertos, a Violin Concerto and a splendid Double Concerto for violin and cello. The piano concertos are fairly traditional in form (though the second has four movements, rather than three), but they both showcase Brahms's contrapuntal skill and imaginative development of ideas.

CHAMBER MUSIC (Tracks 12-30)
Like the symphony, chamber music (and especially the quartet) was seen as a test of the composer's skill. Brahms completed some two dozen pieces of chamber music for a variety of instruments, including trios, quartets, quintets, sextets and sonatas for violin, cello and clarinet; almost all of these have retained a prominent place in the repertory.

CHORAL MUSIC (Tracks 31-33)
Major choral works by Brahms include the monumental *A German Requiem*, a setting of biblical texts for soloists, chorus and orchestra, the beautiful *Alto Rhapsody,* with a text derived from Goethe, the *Schicksalslied* ('Song of Destiny') and a series of accompanied and unaccompanied choral works, written for the choral groups with which he was concerned in Hamburg and in Vienna.

VOCAL MUSIC (Track 34)
Brahms's 213 songs were important additions to the repertoire of the German *Lied* (art song). The *Liebeslieder Waltzes* for vocal quartet and piano duet are particularly delightful, while the solo songs include the moving *Four Serious Songs,* reflecting preoccupations as his life drew to a close.

PIANO MUSIC (Tracks 35-46)
If all the chamber music of Brahms should be heard, the same may be said of his music for piano. Brahms showed a particular talent for the composition of variations, and this is aptly demonstrated in the famous *Variations on a Theme by Handel*. The three piano sonatas, relatively early works, are less well known than the later piano pieces. He wrote a number of ballades, fantasias and other short pieces, as well as music for four hands.